

**Fooling the white folks:
The passing politics of Eurasian Onoto Watanna**
การหลอกลวงคนขาว:
อุบายการแฝงตนของโอโนโต วาตันนา ลูกครึ่งชาวยุโรปและเอเชีย

สุภาภรณ์ ยิ้มวิลัย¹
Supaporn Yimwilai

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาอัตชีวประวัติของ Onoto Watanna เรื่อง *Me: A Book of Remembrance* โดยพยายามหาคำตอบว่าเหตุใดผู้เล่าเรื่องจึงหลีกเลี่ยงการบอกถึงเชื้อชาติของตน และผู้เขียนต้องการพยายามที่จะทำอะไร จากการศึกษาพบว่า Me แสดงให้เห็นถึงความทรามานของลูกครึ่งชาวยุโรปและชาวเอเชียที่ไม่แน่ใจในตัวตนว่าเป็นอะไร ผู้เล่าเรื่องจึงเล่นเกมการแฝงตน การแฝงตนของผู้เล่าเรื่องสะท้อนให้เห็นถึงการแฝงตนเป็นชาวญี่ปุ่นของผู้เขียนเอง ว่าการแฝงตนนี้เป็นการปฏิเสธที่จะถูกจำกัดอยู่ในความจริง ความเชื่อ หรือตัวตนเพียงหนึ่งเดียว การแฝงตนเป็นชาวญี่ปุ่นของผู้เขียนจึงเป็นกลวิธีลับที่ผู้เขียนนำมาใช้เพื่อลบล้างเส้นแบ่งสีผิวและเพื่อที่จะหลอกคนขาว ด้วยการแฝงตนนี้ผู้เขียนสามารถที่จะมีโอกาสมากขึ้น และสามารถเขียนหนังสือเพื่อต่อต้านอำนาจของผู้ชายผิวขาว ซึ่งเธอจะถูกกีดกันถ้าไม่แฝงตน

คำสำคัญ: โอโนโต วาตันนา การแฝงตน นักเขียนชาวเอเชีย-อเมริกัน

Abstract

This research is to study Onoto Watanna's autobiography, *Me: A Book of Remembrance*. It considers why the author avoided identifying either her ethnicity or herself and what the author attempts to accomplish in her autobiography. The result shows that Me reveals the trauma of a Eurasian--the offspring of European and Asian descent--living in liminality. The narrator plays a game of deception—passing. The narrator's life serves as reminders that the author's passing as Japanese is a refusal to be fixed within a single truth, belief, or identity arising from the experiences of racial alienation. However,

¹ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ภาควิชาภาษาตะวันตก คณะมนุษยศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ
Assistant Professor, Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Srinakharinwirot University

passing as Japanese is Watanna's underground tactic to subvert the color line to fool the white people. Through passing, she is able to gain wider opportunity rejected to her, and can employ literary space to resist the white male hegemony.

Keywords: Onoto Watanna, passing, Asian American writer

Introduction

Me: A Book of Remembrance is a fictionalized memoir published anonymously by Onoto Watanna in *The Century* in five installments (April-August 1915). It has a short five-paragraph preface by Webster, the author of the popular children's book *Daddy Long Legs*. According to Webster (1997), this book is a "pure reporting," so it is considered as an autobiography. Later in a year, the Century Company published it in a book form. *Me* caused the reviewers discomfort because the author refuses to identify either her ethnicity or herself. However, Chin (1985, p. 109) in "This is Not an Autobiography" remarks that the ethnic author must negotiate stereotypes, racism, and ethnic traditions and sensibilities in order to convey his or her story to a white readership. In this way, how might we read the memoir by an ethnic author without ethnic signifiers? What happens when an ethnic autobiographer refuses to identify either her ethnicity or herself? What influences her decision to disguise her origin? What does she try to accomplish in writing her autobiography? This study considers all these questions. Smith (1994) argues that "the narrative trajectories of classic passing texts are typically predetermined" by the master narrative of the one-drop rule, which dictates that the protagonists of these fictions must inevitably embrace a "black" identity as a condition of narrative closure. Several of these texts actually use this racialized politics to restrain the options and behavior of black women. Similarly, Harper (1996) examines the cultural production and representation of the "tragic mulatto," arguing that passing narratives uphold the patriarchal construction of racial authenticity through their convention of racial "homecoming." Contrary to these two critics, I propose a method of

interpretation of passing narratives as "radical resistance." Passing can be an underground tactic of resistance to oppression utilized by people of color. One good example is Onoto Watanna.

Theoretical Framework: Passing

According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1990, p. 848), passing is to be accepted identification as a white person though having some Negro ancestry. This definition indicates that passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, and their accompanying rewards or penalties. In addition, passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and also about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen.

The genealogy of the term *passing* in American cultural history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent "white" identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry. As the term metaphorically implies, such an individual crosses or passes through a racial line or boundary--indeed *trespassed*--to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other. As suggested earlier, passing is about the visible and the invisible. Black people who have "white" features are able to pass. This physical appearance makes a stranger see them whites and allows them to pass as white. This passing necessarily involves geographical movement as well; the individual has to leave an environment where his or her "true identity"--that is, parentage and legal status--is known to stay in another place where his or her true identity is unknown.

The origins of the concept of passing are based on the status and privilege accompanying "whiteness" and "maleness." In America, passing can be traced to the sexual exploitation of black slave women by white men. The reproduction of the black men affected economic rights of the slave owners. In other words, black women gave birth to the property of the whites, and because of the "one-drop rule," the offspring of this miscegenation

inherited the slave status of the mother. Although the child had light-skinned body, he/she was marked as black. At the same time, to insure the purity of their whiteness, the white men also needed to exert control of sexual behavior of both white women and black men. It was imperative that white women bear only offspring of the white people. Through the system of slavery, white men were in control of not only the productive labor of black men and black women but also the reproductive activity of white women and black women. In this way, the slavery established a hierarchy of both privilege and oppression in which being "white" and being "male" was at the top of hierarchy. Clearly, the ideological and rhetorical equivalence of slave/black and free/white was undermined. However, the generations of miscegenation made invisible in some individuals those ever smaller percentages of African heritage that would have visibly marked them as "slave," enable legally "black" men and women to pass as white and free. Thus, they could move from the oppressed status to the privilege. In examining Morrison's work, Bennett (2001, p. 206-207) concludes that in *The Bluest Eye and Tar Baby*, Morrison presents characters who are not capable of physically passing for white, and so the dynamics of crossing the color line are moved from the body to the psyche; however, these characters are passing figures too.

The logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities. In this way, as Stonequist (1937, p. 181) points out, passing has been applied to disguise of many elements of an individual's identity such as class, ethnicity, and gender. Clearly, passing can happen in any ethnicity. According to Teng (2013), Eurasians in the United States, China, and Hong Kong faced prejudice from both Europeans and Chinese. They are different and imbued with double-consciousness, always looking at themselves through the eyes of others. Therefore, some Eurasian chose one side that benefited them. For example, they opted to live on the white side of the color line, and some even hid their Asian heritage. In addition, Williams (1997, p. 92), in "Race-ing and Being Raced," suggests that racial passing can be interpreted as "a form of racial alchemy that seeks to best oppression

at its own game by subverting both the compartment line between dominant and subordinate and the arbitrary line between White and Black."

The Passing of a Eurasian

In 1914, in the four weeks between Thanksgiving and New Year's, Onoto Watanna completed her autobiographical writing published under the title, *Me, A Book of Remembrance*. It was reprinted by Moser in 1997. According to Moser (1997), the primary narrative of *Me* tells the story of the narrator, a character meant to represent the young Onoto Watanna, around her seventeenth and eighteenth years. She independently roves around the Caribbean and the United States, taking jobs in Jamaica, Virginia, and Chicago and then moves to New York City to begin her literary career. For the most part, *Me* concerns the trials and tribulations of a young woman abroad and focuses on three main issues: her attempts to make a living, her great desire to be a writer, and her many male admirers.

What is interesting is that the narrator tries to identify with her father's heritage but hides the exact origin of her mother. In *Me*, the narrator is not named until page 27, when she is introduced as Miss Ascough. Later, it becomes evident that her first name is Nora. There is nothing about this name that would suggest anything but British origins. On the first page, the narrator brings up the topic of origin that her father is "an English-Irish man" (Watanna, 1997, p. 3). She makes a point of commenting on her father's English-Irish heritage and his background of wealth and worldliness. Her father is certainly "white," considered to be the superior race. On the other hand, she writes only the following about her mother:

My mother has been a tight-rope dancer in her early youth. She was an excitable, temperamental creature from whose life all romance had been squeezed by the torturing experiences of bearing sixteen children. Moreover, she was a native of a far-distant land, and I do not think she ever got over the feeling of being a stranger in Canada.

(Watanna, 1997, p. 3)

Her unnamed mother is presented as a foreigner in all respects. The mother's early occupation, her emotiveness, her prolific childbearing, and the reference to her native "far-distant land" render her as an excessive exotic. She is quickly summed up as someone who is a perpetual foreigner in Canada. This description is intriguing, provoking readers to wonder about this mysterious woman. The description that her mother "was a native of a far-distant land" reveals that the narrator is certainly unwilling to reveal her mother's true origins; thus, Nora's true heritage is ambiguous. In *Me*, Nora identifies with her father not only because of his race but also because of the power associated with his gender. As a man, her father traveled to Asia. He conducted business in China for his family. After getting married, he worked in the public arena. On the other hand, her mother had to stay home and took care of her children. It is the chance like her father's that Nora longs for. She wants to get away from home to have a good life; she leaves home and sets out for Jamaica to seek her fortune.

Though her mother's story seems not to be the center of her memoir, this autobiographical writing highlights Nora's discomfort with her mother's foreignness. The memoir begins with her first trip away from home; she has accepted a job as a reporter for a Jamaican newspaper, *The Lantern*. This seems to be rooted in fact; although little is known about Watanna's early years, according to Ling (1990, p. 28-29), Watanna went to Jamaica to work as a reporter for *Jamaica News Letter* in 1895. One of Nora's primary preoccupations is the way she looks. She describes herself, "I was not beautiful to look at but I had a bright eager face, black and shining eyes and black and shining hair. I was a little thing, and, like my mother, foreign looking" (Watanna, 1997, p. 6). Such a description can fit a girl of Italian, Jewish, or Greek heritage, among others, or it can fit one of Chinese heritage. At the beginning of the twentieth century, so many foreigners entered North America. Her use of the word "foreign" in discussing herself is no more clear than when she describes her mother. On the ship to Jamaica she affirms, "My hair *did* look attractive, and I was otherwise quite satisfied with my appearance" (Watanna, 1997, p. 14). However, these references to her general

appearance become an anxiety about whether her mother's race is or is not evident in her own face. Miss Foster, the reporter she is replacing on the small daily newspaper in Jamaica, remarks to Nora, "Yes, you'll do. You're quite pretty. You'd better look out . . . There's only a handful of white women here, you know" (Watanna, 1997, p. 31). Miss Foster's statement indicates that she believes that Nora is white. Clearly, Nora can pass as white.

White-Parks (1995, p. 57) notes that one of the Eaton descendants recalls that Grace Trefusis Eaton "warned her children not to tell anyone they were Chinese because she feared they would be sold into 'coolie labor.'" According to White-Parks (1995, p. 57), nobody except Sui Sin Far, among Eaton brothers and sisters, revealed that they were half Chinese. From this information, there is no doubt that Nora, or young Watanna, follows her mother's suggestion: hiding her true heritage. In such British colonies as Jamaica, the racist attitudes of the dominant white populations toward people with skins darker than an Anglo's were similar to those in Montreal described in Sui Sin Far's "Leaves." In that period, the colored distinction could apply to Eurasians. To be "black" is to be in the position of being rejected from one's place or to be put into a place which one might not wish to occupy. Nora recognizes this fact and, therefore, cannot identify with her mother. It is not clear whether Nora, or young Watanna, would have been hired by the white-managed newspaper if it was known that she was half-Chinese.

Nora's concern for her appearance pervades the narrative. For example, at a later point in this book, in Chicago, Nora confesses, "People stared at me too, but in a different sort of way, as if I interested them or they were puzzled to know my nationality" (Watanna, 1997, p. 166). She feels that other people are curious to know her true origin. Then, she continues, "I would have given anything to look less foreign. My darkness marked and crushed me, I who love blondness like the sun" (Watanna, 1997, p. 166). Like Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove, and millions of colored girls in the western world, Nora frequently mentions her love of blondness and blue eyes, which signifies the authentic whiteness that she lacks. In Chicago, a wealthy man friend bought her clothes; she remarks,

No, I was not pretty. I look odd, and when I began to wear fine clothes, I must have appeared very well, for I had all sorts of compliments paid to me. I was told that I looked picturesque, interesting, fascinating, distinguished, lovely, and even more flattering things that were not true.

(Watanna, 1997, p. 184)

This is a strange combination of excessive modesty. Nora's "odd" looks are not "pretty," but she acknowledges having certain attractiveness, or at least an appearance that merits flattery. Ultimately, however, Nora perceives her difference as something of a curse, as is evidenced by her contradictory self-descriptions, proving she is unable to feel entirely attractive. This may also be due to the fact that the words used to describe her stem from orientalizing rhetoric: "picturesque," "interesting," and "fascinating." As Said (1978, p. 55) writes, the Orientalism "helps the mind to intensify its own sense of self by dramatizing the difference and distance between what is close to it and what is far away." In this respect, Orientalism reifies the relationship of power between the West and the Asians as polarities defined by distance. Similarly, the words used to describe Nora show the distance between the speaker and Nora. Nora is different from the speaker, and she is viewed as an exotic object and the source of curiosities.

Nora feels discomfort not only with her mother's foreignness but also with blackness. In Jamaica, where she works as a reporter, for the first time she sees "negroes", her horror of "darkness" is literally fleshed out. When she arrives in Jamaica and waits for someone to pick her up, she feels a hand on her shoulder and screams as "looking up in the steadily deepening twilight saw a smiling face approach my own, and the face was black!" (Watanna, 1997, p. 21). Nora flees to the ship and tells the purser what has happened: he promptly leaves to "skin the hide off that dammed black baboon" (Watanna, 1997, p. 22). Here, the white man calls the black man as "baboon." The black man is viewed as a beast or an animal. Clearly, there is a social distinction between blacks and whites in Jamaica.

Nora's fear of "darkness" is evident in her relationship with Mr. Burbank. Mr. Burbank, a prominent Jamaican, is instrumental in financing the newspaper, *The Lantern*, for which Nora works. Later, Mr. Burbank professes his love for her, proposes marriage, and steals a kiss from her. Nora's responds, "If someone had struck me hard and suddenly upon the head, I could not have experienced a greater shock than the words of that negro gave me" (Watanna, 1997, p. 54-55). Although at her first meeting with Mr. Burbank, Nora notes that he is indeed well dressed and mannerly, it is clear that no manner of class or education can supersede the fact that he is black. Although Nora is shocked and appalled by this proposal, it is the ensuing kiss of Mr. Burbank that physically sickens her. Recalling the incident later, she cringes, "I felt that my mouth was unclean, and that rivers could not wash away that stain upon me" (Watanna, 1997, p. 55-56). In fact, it was blackness that she tries to wash out. Mr. Burbank's behavior does not seem to warrant Nora's extreme behavior; he is polite, speaking with an "odd mixture of embarrassment and assurance" (Watanna, 1997, p. 54). His hesitance in marriage proposal makes him seem unsure and shy: "I want to ask you to--er--marry me" (Watanna, 1997, p. 54). If we compare Mr. Burbank's behavior toward Nora with that of Mr. Manning, a white doctor, the latter seems far more treacherous. Mr. Manning is a married man who tried to force Nora into a sexual relationship while Mr. Burbank forces only a quick kiss and proposes marriage. Furthermore, Mr. Burbank's attempted "seduction" occurs in a public place (an administrative building), while Mr. Manning invades the privacy of Nora's bedroom. In contrast to Mr. Burbank's frank confession of love, the doctor resists the opportunity to seduce Nora in Jamaica and encourages her to come to America (where he knows that she will be penniless and friendless) in order to increase his chances of getting control of her. Nora is unable to foresee Mr. Manning's intentions not only because she is young and inexperienced, but because he is white. Mr. Manning's whiteness protects his lechery.

In addition, through the fear of blackness and the withholding of her own racial background, Nora can reify the image of black men as sexual predators of white women. The scene with Burbank links to racist ideology:

black men harm (white) women and are to be feared. Because of his proposal of marriage and kiss, Mr. Burbank is scripted as a beastly black man (Nora calls him "the great *animal* who had kissed me") whose attraction to Nora is in itself immoral, based on his race. Mr. Burbank's actions, moreover, horrify the white men with whom Nora works, including her boss Mr. Campbell, who declares, "Don't you know better than to stay alone in any building where there are likely to be black men? Even ones who fund the newspaper like Burbank?" (Watanna, 1997, p. 60). Mr. Campbell's response is in stark contrast to his initial directive to Nora, ". . . that it was absolutely necessary for *The Lantern* to have the good-will of the Hon. Mr. Burbank, whom we must support in everything" (Watanna, 1997, p. 33). In a startling reversal Campbell demotes Mr. Burbank from an important financier to a stereotyped black subject, oversexed and dangerous to women. Nora also has a conversation with Verley Marchmont, a reporter from a rival newspaper. He asks, "Did that nigger insult you?" (Watanna, 1997, p. 63). Verley's decision to call Mr. Burbank a "nigger" suggests that despite all of his wealth and reputation, in Jamaica, white men can reduce Burbank to a frightening stereotype. Additionally, the kiss that inspires the clenched hands demonstrates the fear of black sexuality, and by extension, black-white intermarriage. As discussed earlier, in order to guarantee the purity of whiteness, the sexual behavior of black men and white women was the controlling motive. It was not usual for a black man to have a sexual relationship with a white woman. In the same way, Mr. Burbank's behavior is not acceptable and, therefore, is immoral. A black man lusts for a white woman. From this situation, according to both Mr. Campbell and Verley, Nora is seen as white. More importantly, Nora's horror of blackness functions to strengthen her already fragile claim to whiteness.

It is remarkable that the clause, "my own mother was a foreigner" is attached to this narrative. In the beginning of the book, where the narrator plainly describes her mother's perpetual "foreignness," what stands out is that she makes no reference to the comfort of her foreigner mother. And of course, Nora's very purposeful vagueness concerning the specifics of her mother's foreign origins suggests her discomfort with the issue of race. The

narrative reveals a remarkable secret, the shame of her ethnic. She even more insistently declares, "I would have given anything to look less foreign." Nora's sense of inferiority begs to be read as racial inferiority. This is the reason why she identifies with her white father and why she fears of blackness. Like many color people, Nora, or Watanna, is indoctrinated by America's Anglo preference. Although Nora hardly meets the physical qualifications of light skin and blond hair, she does possess the key emotional characteristics: a desire for white privilege and an increasing disassociation from colored people. This ensures that Nora is a passing figure despite her physically inability to pass for white.

Nora's ambiguity about her racial background, her remarks about her "interesting" countenance, and her fear of "darkness" are complicated by her varied relationships with men, which occupy a prominent place in the book. During her brief stay in Jamaica, for example, she charms the gruff Mr. Campbell and is pursued not only by Verley and Mr. Burbank, but by the covetous Dr. Manning as well. Once in Chicago, Nora quickly collects another group of male admirers, including the editor of a magazine that publishes her work, a budding scholar and the wealthy Mr. Hamilton, who wishes to keep her as his mistress. Nora's attraction and manipulation of men in Chicago lead her to lightly confess midway, "I always felt an inability to hurt by refusing anyone who liked me well enough to propose to me, I got into lots of trouble for this--call it moral lack in me,--but I could not help it at the time" (Watanna, 1997, p. 149). Nora's frothy manner here is both engaging and laughably amusing. She rationalizes that she has to accept every man because she does not want to hurt anybody. In this way, she plays a game of deception; she gives them hope, and in turn, she receives money, clothes, and dinner from them. A long list ensues, as she counts everyone from a "plumber who mended our kitchen sink [who] proposed to me just because I made him a cup of tea," to a "poet [who] wrote lovely verse to me, and the Chicago papers actually published it" (Watanna, 1997, p. 209-300).

Nora's relationships with men reach a pinnacle near the end of the book in the revelation that she is, "actually engaged to three men, and I was in love with one who had flatly stated he would never marry me. I lived a life

of not unjoyous deceit" (Watanna, 1997, p. 300). Nora clearly reveals her ability to manipulate a large number of men who vary in class position, nationality, and ethnicity. Nora's "darkness" does not seem to hamper her ability to be "just like any other white American girl"; on the contrary, her "half-way" good look appears to attract men, particularly desirable white men, just as honey attracts bees. In the final tally, Nora indicates that she, much more successfully than Mr. Burbank, will marry white and infuse white America with her mixed-race heritage. Nora can conquer many men and can live a "life of not unjoyous deceit." The book ends when Nora finishes her first novel and is heading to New York City and to the publishing house. However, the game of deception did not stop here but continued in the later life of Watanna.

The Underground Tactic of Watanna

Thirteen years before *Me* was published, Watanna, who in fact was Winnifred Eaton, came to New York and still kept on playing a game of deception. Watanna adopted a Japanese pseudonym and passed as a Japanese writer. Passing as Japanese is Watanna's underground tactic to live "a life of not unjoyous deceit." As Onoto Watanna, she proved to be a commercial success in the literary market.

The questions to ask at this point are: Why Japanese? Why not Chinese? Watanna constructed her "Japanese" persona in reaction to the social and political climate. When at the age of twenty-one Watanna arrived in the United States, her options were limited. With little more than an elementary education, supplemented with reading and creative writing at home, Watanna was undereducated, unconnected, and on her own. "Dark" and "foreign-looking" by her own admission, Watanna was half-Chinese. In the period of Chinese exclusion, admitting that one was half-Chinese guaranteed social ostracism, including obstacles to finding employment, accommodation, and a spouse. There is no doubt that it was difficult for a Chinese Eurasian to succeed in literary career. On the other hand, according to Takaki (1989), the American people had a more positive attitude toward the Japanese than toward the Chinese. In addition, according to art historians Meech and Weisberg (1990), the aesthetic current known as "Japonisme" reached a high point in America

in the 1890s. The first wave of influence from Japan to America came during the 1870s and 1880s, with dramatic results in the decorative arts and interior design. Moreover, many American woman were influenced by Japanese arts and interior design, for example, a Japanese tea room. Also, the boudoir kimonos were admired, and the fashionable American woman adapted them for her own use. By the end of the nineteenth century a series of trade fairs, an increase in the number of wealthy collectors, along with the ease of travel to Asia stimulated a second generation of Americans to a more sophisticated understanding of and deeper involvement with Japanese pictorial arts. In literature, the influence of novels of Japan also resonated as strongly as in fine arts; for example, Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysantheme* (1887) and John Long's *Miss Cherry Blossom* (1895) were very popular. Therefore, as long as there was a recurring theme of Japonisme, claiming to be Japanese was a logical career move for Watanna. As Ling (1990, p. 310) points out, Watanna had "a keen marketing instinct and sense of timing." Clearly, the turn of the century was a perfect moment to become a Japanese novelist.

Passing as a Japanese author enabled Watanna to become one of the best-selling writers of her time. Her first novel, *Miss Nume of Japan*, received much attention. A reviewer made much of the fact that "the author herself is a Japanese, writes English remarkably clear vision" ("Review of *Miss Nume of Japan*," 1899, May 6, p. 6). This success made her keep on writing Japanese novels. Under the guise of a Japanese persona, Onoto Watanna (allegedly a writer of Japanese descent born in Nagasaki, Japan) published a total of two dozen works. And about a dozen "Japanese" romance novels were published by major publishers such as Macmillan and, most frequently, Harper. A few of these novels, such as *The Wooing of Wisteria* (1902) and *Daughters of Nijo* (1904), are love stories about Japanese royalty and nobles in a pre-Meiji Japan. The majority of Watanna's romance novels, however, are set in a modernized Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and they portray American/Japanese love and marriage. The exotic setting and her romance plot, along with the various lengths she went to in authenticating her Japanese writing persona, convinced both Watanna's readers and reviewers that her

writings were authentically Japanese because of her "authentic" ethnic origin. The popularity of her Japanese novels brought Watanna great financial success. According to Ling (1990, p. 31), for many of her novels Watanna received \$15,000 advance royalty, with 50% over-riding royalty after publication. It is not surprising that these substantial financial gains and her prolific production enabled a divorced Watanna to support herself and her four children entirely by her pen.

Watanna was to play her Japanese part to the hilt; therefore, she did everything to guard her reputation as an authentic Japanese writer. In many of the early publicity photos, she wore a kimono because turn-of-the-century Americans assigned more meaning to clothing than we would do today. Historians Henry Yu stresses that clothing as a semiotic marker "could represent not only the difference between the American and non-American, but also the distance between the two" (Yu, 1995, p. 122). By dressing in Japanese clothes, then, Watanna reached for a powerful signifier. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Watanna in kimonos was seen by those who wrote about her as a Japanese.

Also, Watanna gave interviews and created an appropriate history, claiming Nagasaki as her birthplace and a Japanese noblewoman as her mother. One example of the "deceits" she perpetuated is that her writings were accompanied by photographs of the author. The frontispiece of *The Wooing of Wisteria* (1902) is a remarkable example of Watanna and her publisher to make her an authentic Japanese. This frontispiece displays a photograph of an obviously posed Onoto Watanna dressed in a Japanese kimono, reading a book, and standing before an Oriental screen. Japanese calligraphy runs down the lower right-hand margin while the caption reads: "Fac-simile of the author's autograph in Japanese." These two textual modes commonly associated with the authentic--the photograph and the autograph--cooperate to legitimate her masquerade. Additionally, Watanna created other texts to corroborate the fiction of her Japanese heritage, including an entry in *Who's Who in America* (Marquis Who's Who, Inc., 1976, p. 15), which continues to list the birthplace of "Winnifred Eaton Babcock" as Nagasaki, Japan.

Watanna's tactic to claim being Japanese constituted what Williams (1997, p. 62) describes as a shift "from one 'minority' status to the 'more acceptable minority' status--in order to raise [one's] prestige and advance [one's] chances for a qualitatively improved life." Thus, Watanna shifted her status from undesirable to desirable immigrant at a time when West Coast lobbyists stepped up the pressure on Congress to contain Chinese immigration. More importantly, this underground tactic helped her enter the fictional space and then venture into the taboo subjects such as interracial marriage and racial discrimination. Through her romance novels, she could create the world in which the Japanese and Americans were romantically attracted to each other and intermarry. Moreover, she could critique the oppressive power of Anglo-American male hegemony. Through these trickster strategies, as Ling (1990, p. 273) suggests in *Between Worlds*, Watanna could use her pens as a sword to defend Asian people.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study demonstrates that Nora's narrative reveals the trauma of a Eurasian--the offspring of European and Asian descent--living in liminality. Nora's life serves as reminders that Watanna's refusal to be fixed within a single truth, belief, or identity arising from the experiences of racial alienation. Watanna asserted her authority to write as Japanese helped her to successfully step into the popular fiction marketplace. More importantly, her underground tactic helped her to use the fictional space and then adventure into such taboo subject as interracial marriage and the discrimination of biracial children. In his 1998 study, Ling (1998, p. 147-9) historicizes the issue of authenticity that emerged in the mid-1970s as a "crucial site for the Asian American community's self-contestation about how it relates to mainstream culture and the majority society." He points out that when the editors of the 1974 anthology *Aiiieeeee!* dismissed certain Asian American literary works as inauthentic, they invoked "such binary views as historical truth versus appropriation, artistic freedom versus cultural censorship." He also cautions us against treating authentication as "a naïve impulse to return to some unblemished origin," even if we reject the notion that there is such a thing as a "true" Asian American experience

and an ideal mode for representing it. As an alternative, Ling (1998, p. 147) proposes a definition of ethnic authentication as the "process through which Asian American writers had to pass in their cultural struggles in order to gain oppositional--and ironic--consciousness about their being America's racial other." *Me* is a good case in point.

Watanna's life and writing can be looked at for the lessons on experiences of a person who lived at the margin of a society and who attempted to cross boundaries and reach out to others. I hope that the result of this study can be one key to awakening readers to the vitality of cultural difference. Seeing the world through literature, readers will have open minds and will understand other people better. Like Watanna and her sister, Sui Sin Far, I have an ideal vision: "only when the whole world becomes one family will human beings able to see and hear distinctly."

While this study focuses on Watanna, the pioneer of Asian American literature, it also points in a new direction for studying of other minority writers, including Jewish, African American, Chicano/Chicana, and later Asian American writers. There are also some questions that one might consider in studying Asian American literature: How do the politics of race and gender intersect with the politics of class? How does Watanna's *Me*, analyzed here, resonate with and anticipate strategies in contemporary Asian American writing? How are the writings of the Asian American male authors in the nineteenth century?

References

- Bennett, J. (2001). Toni Morrison and the burden of the passing narrative. *African American Review*. 35(2). 205-217.
- Chin, F. (1985). This is not an autobiography. *Genre*. 18(2). 109-130.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. (1996). *Are we not men? Masculine anxiety and the problem of African-American identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ling, A. (1990). *Between worlds: Women writers of chinese ancestry*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Ling, J. (1998). *Narrating nationalisms: Ideology and form in Asian American literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Marquis Who's Who, Inc. (1976). *Who's who in America with world notables* (Vol. 6). Chicago: Marquis Who' Who.
- Meech, J & Gabriel P. (Eds). (1990). *Japonisme comes to America*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Moser, L. T. (1997). Afterword. In Onoto Watanna, *Me: A book of remembrance*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Review of *Miss Nume of Japan*. (1899, May 6). *Union Advertiser*, p. 6.
- Said,E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- Smith, V. (1994). Reading the intersection of race and gender in narratives of passing. *Diacritic*. 24. 43-57.
- Stonequist, E. (1937). *The marginal man: A study in personality and culture conflict*. New York: Rusell & Russell.
- Takaki, R. T. (1989). *Strangers from a different shore: A history of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Teng, E. J. (2013). *Eurasian identities in the United States, China and Hong Kong, 1842-1943*. California: University of California Press, Ltd.
- Watanna, O. (1997). *Me: A book of remembrance*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Webster, J. (1997). Introduction. In Onoto Watanna, *Me: A book of remembrance*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary*. (1990). Norwalk, Conn: Easton Press.
- White-Parks, A. (1995). *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A literary biography*. Urbana: UP of Illinois.
- Williams, T. K. (1997). Race-ing and being raced: The critical interrogation of "passing." *Amerasia Journal*. 23(1). 61-65.
- Yu, H. (1995). *Thinking about Orientals: Modernity, social science, and Asians in twentieth century America*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Princeton University, U.S.A.